

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

**DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln**

---

Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and  
Social Sciences

Great Plains Studies, Center for

---

Spring 2010

## Book Review: *The Grace Abbott Reader* Edited by John Sorensen with Judith Sealander

Sonya Michel

*Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#)

---

Michel, Sonya, "Book Review: *The Grace Abbott Reader* Edited by John Sorensen with Judith Sealander" (2010). *Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences*. 1100.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsresearch/1100>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Research: A Journal of Natural and Social Sciences by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

**The Grace Abbott Reader.** Edited by John Sorensen with Judith Sealander. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. xxxv + 132 pp. Notes, bibliography, index. \$21.95 paper.

Those familiar with the Abbott sisters generally regard Grace as the doer, Edith as the thinker. Both were leading Progressive-Era reformers, but while Edith made her mark as a pioneering social work educator and theorist, Grace—a one-time resident of Hull House who fought for women’s suffrage, immigrant rights, and child welfare—went on to become the second chief of the U.S. Children’s Bureau and gained a reputation as a powerful advocate and effective administrator. Along the way, however, Grace Abbott also wrote a number of articles and speeches that reflect deep thought as well as strong beliefs in equality and progress. This collection allows the reader to grasp the full range of her concerns and trace patterns in her thinking over more than three decades.

Reflecting the major foci of her work, the volume is divided into sections on immigrants, children, and women. The first two are introduced with reflections on Grace’s life and work by sister Edith, the third with a tribute to Grace by Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins. Abbott’s ideas, the pieces reveal, were rooted in practical experience as well as analysis and reflection. Her understanding of young immigrant women, for example, drew on a trip to Poland, where she saw firsthand the conditions that prompted them to undertake the risks of migration. Surprisingly, she found, it was not poverty that drove them, but “a fever running through the entire peasantry.” Nevertheless, Abbott’s experience

also taught her that these same women, once arrived in the U.S., desperately missed their homes and familiar culture, and she pleaded with educators to respect cultural differences rather than enforce assimilation to American ideals. (Indeed, she contended, it was difficult to discern what those ideals might be.) Her approach anticipated by many decades what today we would call “multiculturalism.”

With regard to child welfare, Abbott’s purview included education, maternal and child health, and child labor. Her work at the Children’s Bureau made her aware of what she denounced as “the Washington traffic jam”—the convergence of all manner of vehicles on Capitol Hill in which her young agency appeared to be as frail as a baby carriage. She explicitly recognized two obstacles to gaining Congressional support for mothers and children: legislators’ tendency to devalue them, since they were not wage-earners; and general resistance to governmental social provision, on the grounds that it was “socialist.” Her discussions of women as professionals suggest a third obstacle: widespread reluctance to acknowledge women’s power and influence. As a way to offset this, Abbott invoked the model of Dorothea Dix, the 19th-century champion of better treatment for the insane, and urged women to ground their work in systematic investigation, precise presentation of facts, and thorough knowledge of the legislative process.

In their introduction, editors John Sorensen and Judith Sealander provide a brief but comprehensive overview of Abbott’s life, accomplishments, and legacy. Somewhat hagiographical in tone, it neglects the red-baiting that dogged her throughout much of her career (something that Abbott herself alludes to in several of the selections). An assessment of the impact of this critique on the woman and her work would have been enlightening. **Sonya Michel**, *Director of United States Studies, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars*.